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ABSTRACT

The planning and development of a program to promote interaction among commuter students at Germanna Community College and to provide for their various needs are described. The program involved establishing an Interaction Center (IC) in 1974, centrally located in proximity to the college's learning resources center and library. The center was to function on an informal basis, aiding students to improve study skills through study skill problem diagnosis and tutorial assistance; to improve knowledge of subject matter through diagnosis of subject comprehension problems, tutoring, and a proofreading service; and to improve self-concept, attitudes, motivation, and clarification of educational objectives through informal rap sessions, group discussions, mini-courses in common life activities, interaction with responsive adults, and counseling services. Prior to opening IC, a faculty orientation was held during which center functions were reviewed and staffing schedules were established. An evaluation of IC effectiveness in 1975 indicated that during a two-month period of operation, 649 student entries were logged; they used the center an average of 1.5 hours per visit and 99% indicated their objectives were met in IC use. Problems encountered in IC operation and the benefits of various IC functions to commuter students are discussed. (TR)

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A MODEL FOR PROMOTING STUDENT INTERACTION ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE (COMMUTER) CAMPUSES

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The advent and development of the community college opened the doors of higher education to many thousands of individuals who, otherwise, may have found post-secondary education beyond reach. The open door philosophy of a large community college segment has resulted in rapid growth patterns as students from a cross section of society seek to continue their education. A growing body of commuter students has evolved from the establishment of regional community colleges. In 1974, degree credit enrollments in two-year colleges throughout the United States exceeded two million students (Grant and Lind, 1975, p. 88). Within the Virginia Community College System, enrollments grew from 5,749 students in the fall of 1966 (Harris, 1973, p. 2) to over 85,000 students ten years later (Virginia Community College System, 1976, Table 1C).

The resultant heterogeneity of the community college student population presents a challenge to practitioners in student development programs. Counseling and instructional staffs deal with a wide age span of students whose reasons for matriculating are as varied as the students themselves.

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From the recent high school graduate to the senior citizen, students seek to attain goals ranging from a four-year college degree to obtaining a well-paying job in a technical or business area. Others seek to improve employment skills or to satisfy personal interests. While many students have developed well-defined goals, others are floundering to identify values and to set realistic goals in the midst of external and internal conflicts.

The developmental tasks of the community college student are further complicated because the vast majority of community college students commute, either from their homes or from a convenient location in the vicinity of the institution attended. Thus, the commuting student spends significantly less time than the residential student on the college campus and therefore challenges the college to provide a meaningful and practical program of student developmental services. Schuchman (1974, p. 465), in recognizing this, points out that the commuter student experiences more limited exposure to other students and faculty, and that he or she is often at a disadvantage when faced with newly surfacing needs to resolve conflicting value systems or to develop effective human relationship roles

Four tasks with which young students must deal are identified by Schuchman (1974, pp. 467-468): dealing with authority, managing impulses, maintenance of self-esteem and establishing identity. Schuchman (1974, p. 470) concludes that:

> New ways need to be developed that will enable students to join in and experience activities, people, and ideas that add to their earlier experiences. . . . This kind of contact needs to occur in an atmosphere that minimizes differences in status and encourages exchange of ideas and feelings.

In a review of recent literature on the commuter student, Flanagan (1976, p. 38) notes that the studies support four broad categories in which commuter students differ from other students: Personal history (background), educational goals, abilities (knowledge and skills), and experience. Flanagan (1976, pp. 40-41) concludes that:

> The commuter student is a unique person in higher education. The commuter student tends to perceive higher education differently, experience higher education differently, and, therefore, is affected by higher education differently than the resident student. Higher education is only one of the many concerns of the commuter student and possibly not the primary concern. Improving the educational experience of the commuter student requires educational planning which includes ways to increase contact with significant adults (faculty) and student peers. These personal contacts seem to provide the kind of support for change often not available to the commuter student.

In response to the characteristics of commuter (community college) students, several programs have been undertaken to advance student development in the Virginia Community College System. The Human Potential Seminars developed by McHolland and Trueblood (1972), and the Life Career Development System (Waltz and Benjamin) are but two vehicles through which students are assisted in meeting developmental needs. Vaughan (1974, pp. 54-55) discusses the potential of the "Learning in Transit" program available through Mountain Empire Community College. The Orientation courses (GENL 100)

and specialized programs dealing with values clarification, emerging and changing roles, and human interaction represent other attempts to provide on-going student development projects in many of the community colleges throughout the Commonwealth.

Student developmental needs at Germanna Community College are not uncommon to the generalized needs of commuter students. Such needs evolve from self- or student-based needs, communication needs and cultural induced concerns. The *student-based needs* include such factors as inadequate study habits, lack of fundamental skills in English and Mathematics, anxiety related to collegiate competition, perceived stereotyping based on past academic failure leading to low self-esteem (the "dummy" syndrome), lack of established life goals, and a desire for immediate need gratification.

Communication needs evolve from a basic need for human interaction resulting from communication barriers, perhaps with parents or past associates. Other perceived barriers develop among faculty and students, or because of separation among various college departments and student separation by curriculum. The lack of a warm, inviting physical facility may serve to intensify the communication gap.

Cultural differences surface from the wide variance of students enrolling from rural and urban backgrounds. Often, commuter or community college students are first generation college. They feel singled out because of differences associated with socioeconomic factors, sex, race, and age.

Changing values and newly developing conflicts with parents add to the effects of cultural differences, whether real or perceived.

PROPOSED MODEL

The success or failure of a new service or program within a college setting often depends on the dedication and involvement of the participants as well as the support received from the administration. In developing a model to promote interaction among the commuter students at Germanna Community College, two student-centered staff members, David A. Sellars and Mark Smith -- a reading specialist and counselor respectively -- gained initial support from a department chairman, Don Provo. Aware of the dynamics of involving personnel in planning a new program and with Provo's initial support and encouragement, Sellars and Smith carried the concept informally to a number of faculty members and counselors. Given time, ideas jelled and the concept evolved into a written proposal which would outline the structure under which a center would be established to encourage Germanna Community College students to deal with developmental concerns. In the initial proposal, Provo, Sellars and Smith (1974a) suggested that a number of activities be undertaken to promote study skills, increase knowledge of subject matter, create positive self-concept and attitudes, increase motivation and identify educational objectives among students at Germanna Community College. The proposal endorsed a concept of college-wide involvement in which faculty, counselors, administrators and students could

become active participants in the operation of a center devoted to furnishing an opportunity for students to interact on an individual and small group basis. The basic functions of the center were outlined in the proposal (Provo, et al 1974a) as follows:

I. To improve study skills the center could provide:

1. Diagnosis of study skills problems
2. Assistance and instruction to the student in the areas of studying textbooks and notes, studying for a test, and test taking

II. To improve knowledge of subject matter, the center could provide:

1. Diagnosis of reading, math and other subject matter problems
2. Tutoring in basic reading, English and math skills necessary for success in his course work
3. Tutoring in any of his current courses
4. Assistance and instruction to the student referred to the center by his instructor in the specific skills necessary for success in that class
5. A proofreading service which will identify sentences or paragraphs of his written assignments which contain errors of grammar and usage and which will allow him to identify and correct the errors on his own, using available resource materials

III. To improve self-concept, attitudes, motivation and clarification of educational objectives the center could provide:

1. A nucleus to develop informal "rap" sessions
2. Leadership for the formation of groups to discuss values, goals, motivation, human interaction processes
3. Mini-courses or programs in common life activities, i.e., how to apply for a job, write resumes, apply for auto loan, etc.
4. Warm, friendly adults
5. Personal, vocational, and academic couseling

The proposed center was to be known as the Interaction Center (IC). To be centrally located in proximity to the College's learning resources center and library, the area

would be refurnished to provide an informal atmosphere. Groupings of furniture were to be arranged and the barriers of desks and other academic paraphernalia which establish th traditional domain of the teacher-student were to be absent. Easy chairs, tables and lamps, carpeting and wall decorations were proposed to achieve an informal setting. The authors of the IC proposal felt that the implementation would serve to provide:

1. A climate or atmosphere in which formal or threatening barriers are eliminated
2. An increase of interaction among students, faculty, administration and counselors
3. A reduction in the possibilities of a student dropping out of the College without giving himself a fair chance of success
4. Assistance to the College in fulfilling its purpose(s) as an open door comprehensive community college

-- Provo, et al., 1974a

Since the physical facilities of the College tend to separate faculty, students and administration into their various component groups, Provo, Sellars and Smith were of the opinion that the IC would facilitate increased interaction among the groups and integrate such areas as the learning resources center, the library and the counseling services. In helping to create a more unified atmosphere within the College, the IC would provide an inviting physical environment to reduce communication barriers and permit productive interaction among other previously seclusive groups such as liberal arts students, nursing students, high school cliques and other students associated by common bonds such as sex, race, age or marital status.

IMPLEMENTATION

To implement the model, Sellars accepted responsibility to coordinate the project. In December 1973 Sellars and Smith talked with each faculty member and counselor about the IC concept; they elicited suggestions and developed the 1974 proposal. Endorsement and support for the project were obtained from the College administration and the project was endorsed by the Student Government Association which provided a small operating fund to assist in equipping the IC. Some furniture and a coffee pot were donated by interested faculty members.

Provo, Sellars and Smith (1974b and 1974c) sent two letters to the faculty during the summer of 1974. These letters informed the faculty that classroom space had been committed to the IC and that the physical conversion was to be undertaken. The letters emphasized the cognitive and affective growth objectives of the center and solicited faculty participation in the operation of the center. The faculty letters addressed a somewhat sensitive issue of de-emphasizing the normal, official capacities of the college staff whereby an open and receptive setting could be maintained in the IC. Hence, the demeanor of academic status was to be down-played in the IC. Faculty were informed that they could be released from their required office hours to participate in the IC. The second faculty letter (1974c) announced an opening date for the IC and requested the participation of faculty in an organizational meeting to be held during the faculty orientation period just prior to the

beginning of fall classes.

During the faculty orientation period, Sellars worked closely with the faculty to review the functions of the IC and to establish schedules for staffing the center during the academic year. Posted schedules revealed that many administrators, faculty and the entire counseling staff were to be involved in the IC. In addition, several students volunteered their time on a scheduled basis. The center was opened on schedule on October 7, 1974, and students began using the facility on a regular basis.

EVALUATION

During the early operation of the IC, students were asked to log their objectives for using the facility and to indicate if their objectives had been reached. A report published in January, 1975 (Interaction Center) indicated that during a two-month period of operation, 649 entries were logged. Students indicated an average time of utilization to be over 1-1/2 hours for each visit. Of the students completing the log, 52 percent indicated they used the IC for improving study skills, tutoring, doing homework or preparing for exams; 48 percent indicated dealing with common life problems as their reason for utilizing the facility. Ninety-nine percent of the respondents indicated their objectives for using the IC were attained.

Comments from the log sheets were generally positive. A sampling follows:

-- This is a nice, informal place to meet many people, have good talks, and relax.
-- Very comfortable atmosphere.
-- Fantastic!
-- Good coffee, nice atmosphere, nice chairs.
-- Want more Rap Sessions.
-- The help I get in here makes all the difference.
-- Provides a more intimate, comfortable, friendly atmosphere.
-- If I couldn't come here, I'd bounce off the walls.
-- Got lots of people to help. Could use more reference books in here.

-- Ridge, 1975

Early observations by Sellars and Smith (Ridge, 1975) revealed that the sophomore and returning students were somewhat suspicious of the newly organized IC, whereas incoming freshmen liked the concept and felt comfortable with it from the start. Older students including veterans, women changing roles and men changing careers found the center to provide a forum for an active, sometimes vehement exchange of ideas.

Sellars and Smith also observed that a number of faculty members were uncomfortable with the concept and did not know how to respond to their feelings; many would have liked more structure. Talk about sex or the drug scene became topics of embarrassment for some of the faculty. A degree of cliquishness among students seemed to develop, but, generally, the perceived cliques were composed of a group of students who utilized the IC for an hour or so between classes; the "cliques" changed each hour.

During early 1975, Provo, Sellars and Smith undertook a survey to determine faculty perceptions of the IC. Of the 22 faculty members who responded to the survey, nine were

involved in the IC two or more hours per week, and 16 had encouraged their students to utilize the IC.

Of the participating faculty, the three top activities reported as taking place in the IC were (1) socializing, (2) planning ways to attain educational objectives for students, and (3) dealing with the personal problems of students. Non-participating faculty members ranked their perceptions of what took place in the IC as (1) socializing, (2) counseling and (3) dealing with personal problems of students.

Although several faculty members felt the IC served as a second lounge, the 1975 study revealed that faculty seemed receptive of the IC in general. A source of conflict seemed to surface when several faculty members noted that some children were being "dropped off" at the IC. (The College does not provide day care center facilities.) One perceptive faculty member did note that some beneficial social learning had taken place where several students discovered that they really enjoyed being around children.

DISCUSSION

The benefits of establishing and implementing the Interaction Center model have been numerous, but practical limitations developed which will be addressed as well.

Increased communication and a feeling of staff cooperation and involvement developed throughout the duration of the project. Sellars' and Smith's active solicitation of support from all segments of the College community proved to be an

astute approach. Starting with faculty, they involved students, counselors and administration in creating a dynamic resource for the potential benefit of the entire College community. The needs of a wide segment of students were met on a cognitive and affective level as alternative doors to communication and interaction were opened.

Small group activities evolved in the IC. A Friday afternoon jam session or a noontime rap session were common "happenings". The Campus Christian Ministry of Mary Washington College became interested in the potential of the IC and subsequently a weekly seminar on contemporary topics was sponsored by the group. Instructors began to schedule one- and two-hour seminars and workshops for special interest groups. Students found an area for quiet study and many received practical assistance in becoming better students.

Since Germanna lacks the facilities of a residential college, the IC became a focus for facilitating those heated discussions which often take place in the dormitory. To serve as a needed outlet for testing new ideas and exploring changing values, the focus on communication in the IC led to new opportunities for self-exploration; the IC provided a valuable resource for student development.

The tutoring and academic assistance programs that faculty members and concerned students provided helped to promote greater self-confidence among many students. By providing resource materials relative to student needs and through a close working relationship with the learning

resources center and the library, students became better informed and more prepared to utilize the College as a center for learning.

The maintenance of the IC program posed difficult questions and problems. Sellars undertook the demanding task of coordinating the IC staffing schedule. In time it became difficult to maintain the optimal staffing levels initially achieved because of the myriad of demands on faculty time. Gradually, the IC evolved into a more structured environment where events were programmed and other activities were scheduled as determined or requested by the IC participants; the IC lost its initial thrust of spontaneity. To maintain the IC as a viable program within the College setting, an active program of coordination should be maintained. Over time, the prime movers of the model were lost to attrition. Dave Sellars is now implementing his student-centered philosophy in Tennessee; Mark Smith has departed to work on doctoral studies in Iowa, and Don Provo moved down the road to Richmond where he shares his talents with J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College.

Given proper resources and a small group of highly motivated and concerned faculty, the potential for a dynamic resource exists in the Interaction Center concept. The model was tried at Germanna Community College and found to have merit. But, the momentum of maintaining its high level of activity was lost to other endeavors. The IC concept evolved and changed as other priorities emerged. One of the IC rooms

has been reclaimed for a classroom, but the learning resources center has been expanded to permit greater student-instructor involvement in the remedial areas. A greater awareness of student developmental needs emerged thrugh the active participation of the College staff in the IC, and a new thrust toward providing information relative to careers, transfer education and changing women's roles has developed.

The IC has now evolved in the direction of a resource center. The rug is worn and the coffee pot molded when java prices skyrocketed, but the furniture remains intact and our students and staff are encouraged to use the resource often to benefit the commuter student who needs a personal and special kind of support so often overlooked by our rapidly changing society.

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